DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 501 FL 010 050

AUTHOR	Antier, Maurice
TITLE	That Comprehension Business!
PUB DATE	Apr 78
NOTE	15p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (London, England, April 1978)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cloze Procedure; Cognitive Processes; Communication Skills; *Comprehension; Comprehension Development; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Interference (Language Learning); *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Language Tests; Learning Processes; *Listening Comprehension; Memory; Psycholinguistics; Reading Comprehension; Secondary Education; *Second Language Learning; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Comprehension for the foreign language learner is discussed, and it is claimed that comprehension is not a by-product of the other skills but should be taught and tested throughout a course of study. The channel or medium used in communication will influence the understanding of the message. Differences involved in reading and listening comprehension are cited, and comprehension is discussed in terms of feedback and empathy. It is felt that drills and repetitions can hamper comprehension, as can excessive reliance on written material. Comprehension can only be taught by first eliminating the causes of negative feedback. The first basis for adequate comprehension is motivation and interest in the content of materials and activities. It is important to grasp the meaning of the whole; miscomprehension can result from hastily forming conclusions from segments. Teaching comprehension may profit from proceeding from phonological discrimination, to juncture contrasts, to dictation at increasing speeds, and to student note taking of a short speech. Comprehension tests must be designed with knowledge of the student's mother tongue, and tests should use material that is spoken English, as well as standard English. Probably the best test that has been so far devised for measuring listening comprehension is the cloze procedure. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maurice Antier

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED165501

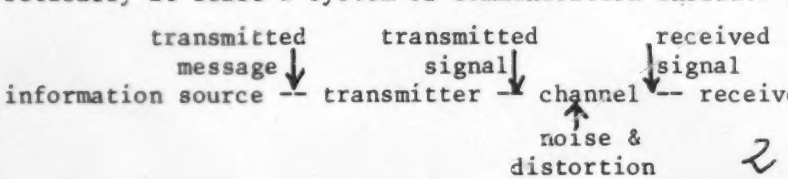
FL010050

THAT COMPREHENSION BUSINESS !

Most of you, I suppose, are familiar with the story told by *George Mikes* in "How to be inimitable" about his first problems with understanding English in England. As he said "On arriving in this country I found that Budapest English was quite different from London English". And he added ; "In England I found two difficulties. First I did not understand people, and secondly they did not understand me... The first step in my progress was when people started understanding me while I still could not understand them. This was the most talkative period in my life. "Trying to beat the natives at their own game, in other words to out-talk them is indeed a well-known way of concealing one's own difficulties. It seems that we have worked so hard at making our students talk that we have forgotten that comprehension is at the root of any kind of teaching, foreign languages included. In the first lessons we use all sorts of means to make ourselves understood, mimetic, audiovisual and what not. We try everything, from facial contortions to ingratiating or threatening gestures to convey our meaning. We ask the silliest questions, repeat the same greetings a hundred times ; all of this to convince our audience that the strange sounds we are uttering do indeed make sense in spite of appearances. So that we heave a sigh of relief when even the dullest student does not answer "Thank you" when we ask him the time.

If only we knew what is happening in his mind between the moment we ask the question or give the order and his answer, we might help him on the way of progress. The object of this paper is to see if and how this can be achieved.

I.I. If we refer to any treatise of information theory we see that theoretically at least a system of communication includes five elements :



The output of the *information Source*, i. e. the message is transformed by the *transmitter* into a signal and communicated to the *destination* through the *channel*. Meanwhile the signal may be (and usually is) altered by noise and/or distortion. "Noise" can be defined as "unpredictable perturbation", whereas "distortion" is "a fixed operation applied to the signal". The receiver performs an operation which is symmetrical to the one performed by the transmitter : we pass on from encoding to decoding the signal. In addition, the receiver has to reduce the noise or distortion effects if and when possible.

We are only concerned here with the second phase of the operation. We realise that the channel or the medium used will influence the understanding of the message.

I.2. It might be necessary at this point to draw the line somewhere between what we language teachers call *comprehension* and what is generally meant by *understanding*. Comprehension is only that aspect of understanding which we consider attainable by the foreign learner, at least in the beginning and early stages. To quote Robert Lado in *Language Testing*, p. 205 (1961), it consists in the understanding of "those language elements that native speakers understand by the mere fact of being native speakers of the language and not by any special training of particular native speakers". This definition is attractive because it is simple, but also because of what it does not say. It does not, for instance, refer to the distinction between denotation and connotation. Comprehension then, as defined by Lado, cannot refer to the purely denotative aspect of the foreign language. Even such everyday words as "Kettle, bread, fireplace" are loaded with connotations which may differ widely when we move from the Continent to Britain. We don't and can't teach a fleshless, boneless, bloodless kind of basic English. In addition we are well aware that when we analyse a specific utterance, we are to consider the speaker and his audience as much as the properly linguistic components of the utterance. When we teach English, we remain ourselves, i. e. individuals with a specific economic, social, intellectual, and moral background, face to face with students who may belong, for instance, to entirely different social backgrounds. Teaching English is not the same as teaching maths or physics.

What has just been said remains valid as regards both types of *comprehension*; *listening and reading*. But for the foreign language learner there are big differences between them. The first is that the listener can adjust his power of attention to the speaker's speed of delivery. The second is that he must remain constantly on the look-out for phonological variations, The third is that in the oral code the grammar and vocabulary can be different, sometimes *very* different from those used in the written code. If we now turn to reading comprehension, we see that the reader's attention is of an entirely different nature, generally more concentrated, less hurried. Punctuation and typography are often great helps to comprehension. But the vocabulary and grammar are likely to be far more elaborate than in the oral code. This is particularly true in the case of technical language and of course of "literature".

Finally it is clear that comprehension requires as much *activity* from the listener as the speaker. It is not a passive skill any more than reading comprehension because the decoding process requires at least as much competence as the encoding one. Comprehension requires as much nimbleness of mind as any other form of language-learning. This is why we cannot be content with the vagueness of Lado's definition. Of course we cannot teach all varieties of spoken English, from New-Zealand to the Orkneys from Bloomsbury to Notting Hill, from five-year-olds to patriarchs. But then we cannot expect our students either to understand all kinds of technical language, to say nothing of slang,poetry, initials, proverbs, etc... All these restrictions or negative implications might easily lead us into a blind alley : the one of harmless exchanges, phatic communion, small talk, etc...

I.3.I.The fact is that in most cases we have given up any attempt at teaching the English of past centuries, except for purely literary purposes, and this only to students who will specialise in English. We generally teach what is loosely termed "*standard English*" although nobody has ever been able to give a scientific definition of this phrase. A couple of years ago, in a collection of essays entitled "Contemporary Approaches to English Studies", *George Steiner* wrote this : "The current condition of spoken and written English in Britain... does reflect...the decline in

the fortunes of the United Kingdom ... Popular parlance is now taking on an unprecedented social importance ... The politics of British existence are now crucially interwoven with (the habits of definition, of communication, of desire and conflict, as they are now enacted in) the language of the sixteen year old school leaver. "Professor Steiner bases his diagnosis on three symptoms "the media-code, Americanization and the transfer of political-economic powers to a new, much wider social spectrum". Let me repeat it : "the language of the sixteen-year old school-leaver". We cannot afford to ignore these facts in an analysis of comprehension. The main reason is that what, in the same collection, Raymond Williams calls the"conventions of intelligibility"have changed, not only in literary language but also in every day language. You have only to think of such vogue-words as "bloody-mindedness, anchor, sea-change". But what is a vogue-word, anyway ? And what about jargons, officialese, for instance, which even the native speakers of English fail to understand sometimes ? ("major environmental amenity 'for' park").

I.3.2.Regarding comprehension proper, let us add that the student's personal position vis-à-vis the English language cannot be ignored. As we all know he naturally tends to attribute a similar value (or meaning) to a phoneme or a word which he knows in his mother-tongue and which he thinks he recognizes in English. The closer this language is to English, the more likely the confusions and misunderstandings. The French student listening to an English radio program will all too often hear "feet" instead of "fit", "ease" instead of "is", etc... The situation is not so very different when he is reading. He thinks he understands, because the structure of sentences is so often parallel to that of French and there are so many words which *look* the same in both languages. But it is a matter of constant concern to the teacher to warn him against those deceptive appearances. It is an endless, perhaps hopeless task.

I.3.3.The student labours under another sort of handicap when he finds himself in what we way call "the third-party position", attending a conversation between two native speakers for instance, or a debate over the radio or on television. Being a spectator is not in the least a comfortable position, as we all know from seeing recent English plays (all of them "hilariously funny" of course). This is another obstacle to comprehension.

It is true however that for those of us who have been trained to "understand" in the fullest sense of the term, the conventions of literature and especially those of the theatre and the screen : the varieties of language, the use of flashback, the tricks of montage, the rapid changes in moods and places are so familiar that eventually they are more of a help than a hindrance.

I.4. To complete this attempt at mapping the immense territory of comprehension, the above problems will lead us to two of its major aspects which are fully dealt with in *The Speech Communication Process* by Theodore Clevenger and Jack Matthews. *The first* is the feedback effect. Its absence is precisely what makes it so difficult for us to follow a conversation not intented for us. Cybernetics tells us that we are to *distinguish between positive and negative feedback*. When the temperature of a room is monitored by a thermostat, the latter sends signals which turn the furnace on or off when necessary. We meet with a parallel situation when we consider the mechanics of comprehension. There is hardly any feedback if we are watching TV or listening to radio. But things are different in conversation and in the class-room. If we really want to understand what we are being told, we are constantly on the watch for clues and cues, not all of them linguistic, which will help us do so. Many books have been written about this, the most interesting for us being perhaps *The Silent Language* by Edward T. Hall and *I'm O.K. You are O.K.* by Th. Harris. In conversation or in a lecture-room, the speaker's attitude, his choice of words, his tone of voice, his hesitations, his mumblings, are so many clues to his meaning or intentions and the listeners react accordingly.

All this is part of *the second* aspect of comprehension which remains to be examined and which is a special feeling for a person or a thing, that which, so to speak, puts us in tune with him or her, or, if you prefer, what psychologists call empathy. It is the ultimate in comprehension, since it is identification with the thoughts and feelings of another. Empathy is the royal road to comprehension against all odds. It can enable you to enjoy say , a conversation mixed with songs in an Irish pub, even if most

of the words exchanged are unknown to you, Empathy is a short-cut in the process of comprehension. Of course it works both ways and I needn't remind you that love-making is a time-honoured technique of learning foreign tongues. But our students don't require our help here and I am afraid I will have to leave it aside from what is going to be the second part of this paper, and that is : how are we to teach comprehension.

2.I.I.Let us return to the description we first used of a system of communication. Comprehension is a 100 % satisfactory if the message received is rigorously equivalent to the transmitted one. The teacher's job is to make this possible for his students. Needless to say this is a purely theoretical view. Since the various conditions of full comprehension which we have so far listed are never completely met, in other words since communication is always disturbed by some amount of "noise" or "distortion", we can only do what we can to reduce the negative feedback and increase the positive feedback. And we might just as well take a sober view of our pedagogical powers. For instance we cannot act on the distortions due to the channel, still less on those due to the source of the message, or its destination for that matter. When we use a tape-recorder, anything can happen, as we all know. Then the documents we use, the source, is never perfectly suited to our student's discrimination powers. After all there is such a thing as intelligence, and much though we may regret it, it has not been equally imparted to all of us. Our British colleagues teaching in some comprehensive schools and now faced with "mixed-ability classes" would certainly see my point at once. Nevertheless it is our task to train our students to decode as much as possible of a given message. This they will do by piercing the noise effects inherent to the channel even if some of it remains irreducible (I am thinking of the telephone or of some types of radio reception or of local accents).

2.I.2.Let us then consider what we can do to reduce what I have called the negative feedback. We are all agreed that if communication is perturbed, teaching is impossible. Here the foreign language teacher is confronted with an essentially different problem from the one of his colleagues : the reason is that *his medium is also his subject*. Then he has only to choose the lesser of two evils. Either he will try to adjust to the level of his

audience and this kind of negative feedback is sure to slow the pace of comprehension immensely. For instance, he will reduce his speed of delivery, consciously or not, and limit his vocabulary so drastically that his English will become the unspeakable, unmentionable, but nevertheless well-known dialect, called classroom English. Or he will choose the alternative of speaking at normal speed, using the normal vocabulary and syntax of "standard English". Then he runs the risk of alienating a sizable proportion of his listeners who will gradually (or abruptly) separate themselves from what's going on above their heads. Of course he will try to avoid those unfortunate consequences by answering questions, writing new words on the board etc... This is positive feedback and welcome as such. But it remains part of the limitations due to the classroom situation which as we all know has no equivalent in real life. In other words we delude ourselves into thinking that our students understand English English, but this is only partially true.

2.I.3.The second obstacle on our road when we want really to teach comprehension lies in some of our techniques. The old grammar-translation method certainly was not very helpful as regards listening comprehension. But I am not sure that *manipulation* and *pattern-practice* give better results from this particular point of view. Isn't comprehension more hampered than helped by drills and repetitions even of the most sophisticated type ? One of the reasons why language-labs have become such places of boredom and intellectual desolation is, I suspect, that they don't sufficiently rely on the positive feedback born from empathy. It is so facile to get used to the droning of unfamiliar noises through the earphones, while substituting one word for another when thought appropriate, or at random as the case may be. It is, after all, common knowledge that in a language lab, the teacher can only give fractional attention to the needs of individual students. This is especially the case with adult learners. So that success in the lab soon requires more mechanical skill than activity of the little grey cells.

2.I.4.Another negative element, at all stages, is excessive *reliance on written material*, this is where manipulation is likely to impede comprehension . Because, whatever the method used, we make pupils repeat what

they have just heard, then use words and phrases, build up sentences grammatically, in response to stimuli, so that eventually they express themselves as naturally as possible. Their comprehension of the directions given or of the questions asked is assumed to be sufficiently proved by their ability to respond (or answer) correctly. But isn't this true only in the case of absolute beginners ? Isn't this an ideal situation which is altered as soon as the teacher starts using more elaborate material, as soon as he ceases to rely on pictures, mimic and audio-visual aids in general ? The moment he uses paraphrases, synonyms , antonyms and other rhetorical devices which his students are not always familiar with, they are likely to receive a distorted message, he will not be fully understood or at least he may be misunderstood part of the time by part of this audience. And of course nobody will claim that audio-visual courses make for constant full-comprehension. The result is that we are too prone to take comprehension for granted, and by so doing we foster a passive attitude in our students which is all the more dangerous as it is habit-forming and counter-productive. Because of the inevitable weaknesses of memory and attention, but also because of some flaws in our teaching techniques themselves, there constantly remain holes to be plugged and gaps to be filled in the messages that reach our listeners, all the more so as the class is more numerous. Indeed it is probably comprehension that suffers most from the lack of individual attendance.

But the fault also lies in the learner himself of course. In the earlier stages, his motto seems to be "I understand, therefore I know". Then the more he learns, the more he tends to by-pass comprehension. He would like to forget about it, he is content with woolly thoughts and vague notions, as long as he thinks he can say what he means. We remember the example of George Mikes, that I quoted earlier.

The fact is that we can only teach comprehension by first eliminating all those causes of negative feedback and this is no easy task. Then we will try to reinforce the positive elements. Here are now a few suggestions to this effect.

2.2.I.The first refers to the content of the message. We can neither

concentrate on nor remember what we are not interested in. We understand very little of a book or article which bores us. Again we are equally bored by what we don't really understand. Our attention to a conversation or a debate which does not concern us is minimal. It follows that our comprehension of the arguments exchanged or propounded is also minimal. So, as in many fields of language teaching the first basis for adequate comprehension is motivation. If you are ill in a foreign country, you will do all you can to understand the foreign doctor's questions. If you have to use a hi-fi recorder with directions printed in English, as is so often the case, you will be very careful not to omit the slightest detail.

2.2.2.But at the same time, and this brings us to our second point, you will be very careful to grasp the meaning of the whole. Too many students are apt to forget this cardinal rule of comprehension either when they are listening to a speech of preparing to translate from English into their mother-tongue. Far too many mistakes result from this sort of haste. They ought to train themselves to forget about fragments or segments and concentrate on the whole. Finally the problem remains of how to bridge the gap between English and the undiluted, undoctored type of Language.

2.2.3.For instance it is fairly easy in the North and the West of France to tune in to the BBC and pass on in a matter of seconds from an English by Radio Program to one intended (on Radio 4) for the British audience. It is the sort of experience you have if after listening to Pedagogical Pop, you move on to Yesterday in Parliament, for instance. In the former an extract from a pop-song is very cleverly turned to pedagogical use by means of repetitions, use of synonyms, paraphrase, explanation etc..., all of this in step with a familiar tune. This is an excellent example of the sort of necessary transition I have in mind. But all the same, the moment you switch over to Radio 4, the pedagogical props disappear and you are left to your own resources just as in real life, if you want to find your way among the intricacies of British parliamentary proceedings. The obvious conclusion is that if *motivation* is the first word in comprehension, the second is *context*, Our student's attention is to be

---

In L. Carrol's words "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves.

channelled into specific aspects of the foreign civilization, in the same way as they have chosen one special field of study in their own native culture, be it medicine or law or what not. We must constantly bring them new food in the way of background information.

2.2.4.So a syllabus for teaching comprehension might go on something like this. *First stage*, concentrate on purely phonological discrimination : weak and strong vowels, use of contracted forms, minimal pairs, role of stress and intonation patterns. *Second stage*, invent exercises based on juncture contrasts such as "he looked / over the wall" and "he looked over / the wall", or "the boy, who stood up, was tall" and "the boy who stood up, was tall" etc... *Third stage*, use dictation at increasing speeds in which will be included figures, geographical and historical names, with or without preparation. *Fourth stage*, let students be trained to take down notes, after a short speech (between three and five minutes), even to the point of verbatim rendering.

Parallel exercises can be suggested in the case of reading comprehension. But in the pedagogy of comprehension it never pays to hide the truth. And the truth here is what we can't teach or [illegible] learn everything The student should be trained as early as possible to realise that there are many mansions in his father's house, that the dialect of English he has been taught is only one among several. True he cannot learn to speak all of them and if only for practical reasons, some sort of choice has to be made, and it is usually made by the teacher, since he can only teach the English he himself is familiar with, or the one most generally taught in his country. But it is counter-productive and even dishonest to let one's students imagine that there is only one proper way of speaking English and this is the teacher's way. If, as we have seen, contrastive linguistics is helpful in the elementary teaching of comprehension, sociolinguistics may be equally important at an intermediate stage. Clues for content, cues for response, such are the pre-requisites of any course which does not beg the question,i.e.take comprehension for granted from the start.

3.I.I.Let us now consider the problem of how to assess comprehension. I must say I am not very happy about the existing tests. However admirable for instance may be the books and recordings provided by British and American publishing firms, they fail to take into account the dependence of the foreign student on his own mother-tongue in his understanding of either spoken or written English. Most of the books and tests I have in mind have been conceived for indiscriminate use throughout the world, very rarely for instance paying attention to the fact that here English is taught as a foreign language and there as a second language. The result is that the tests sometimes give the impression of having been unscientifically designed, bearing for instance on words likely to baffle the native speaker of English but very easily guessed by one with a different linguistic background. In fact no comprehension test can be properly designed without knowledge of the student's mother-tongue (In his book on Language Testing, Robert Lado had some essential points to make in this respect). It follows that so-called universal tests are to a large extent frustrating for the student and of little use to the teacher.

3.1.2.The second point which deserves criticism is the type of test used. In one type of listening comprehension test, the students are required to listen to a spoken version of a written text, very often an extract form a newspaper. The reading aloud (by an English native speaker) takes between four and five minutes at most. The students are generally allowed to take notes and the text is repeated three times. The students are then asked to render the text as accurately and faithfully as possible. Such procedure is open to criticism on three counts. First the material used is not really spoken English, but written English read aloud, which is not at all the same thing. Secondly, it is obvious that a student with a good memory will pass this test with flying colours, even if his real comprehension of the material is not perfect and in spite of the fact that the triple repetition will help those with a poor memory. Thirdly, the examiner who scores the test does so on the stregth of the notes which he himself has taken and even if the student's performance has been recorded, the rate of subjectivity in the evaluation remains high.

3.2.I.Consequently it appears that this type of test can only be valid if

three conditions are met. First the material used should be genuine unadulterated spoken English. Of course the examiner will limit himself to Standard English. But he cannot rely on one variety of English only. And there is little doubt that American as well as British, native speakers should make some of the recordings if not the majority of them. Then the contents should be varied too : interviews, extracts from actual speeches or university lectures, newsbulletins or comments, etc... Lastly even if it is impossible to overlook the part played by memory in the comprehension process one can at least reduce the subjective factor in evaluating the results of the test, by using multiple-choice-questions, while at the same time making allowance for the well-known limitations of this technique.

3.2.2.Even so the results won't be very satisfactory. But the use of what we might call the third-party technique could help. What I have in mind is this. A conversation is organized between the student and a native speaker. The theme has been accepted in advance by the speaker, the examiner and possibly (though not necessarily) by the student. The examiner does not take part in the conversation (which will be recorded), he is merely eavesdropping or he may just as well listen to the recording. The clues we have mentioned as well as some keywords can easily be listed in advance : the student's performance will then be assessed against the checklist thus prepared.

3.2.3.Probably the best test that has been so far devised for measuring listening comprehension is the so-called "clozure - test" as described by Wilson Taylor and completed by various improvements or experiments such as those mentioned in an article by Hugh Templeton which appeared in English Language Teaching (Volume XXXI, number 4, july 1977). "The procedure consists of randomly deleting parts of a language unit and asking subjects to respond by suggesting the missing elements". I have been using this technique off and on for the last fifteen years and found it highly satisfactory. My only suggestion is that deleting every tenth, every fifteenth or even every twentieth word leaves too much to chance. And it inevitably leads to testing sessions of excessive length. I prefer to use shorter pieces, to be dictated in a quarter of an hour's time, and deleting, say 20 to thirty words according to their lexical or grammatical interest.

3.2.4.There remains a lot to be said about reading comprehension. All things being equal it is probably easier to teach and test than listening comprehension, if only because we can rely on well-tried traditions. Lado only considers the problem at the beginner's stage, where it is less difficult to solve. At the intermediate and advanced levels, the main trouble is that nobody knows exactly what to test nor how to test it. Here the traditional method, which is translation, has proved sufficiently harmful for us not to repeat the arguments against it. Let us however remember that it has its good points, at the advanced level, even as a comprehension test. When all is said and done,it is the easiest way to check the student's grasp of such basic linguistic items as prepositions, conjunctions, verb tenses, etc... Provided the examiner is well informed about what to test in a translation, it can still be of some use.

Our conclusion will be twofold. First one can no longer underestimate the importance of comprehension in English language teaching. It is not a mere by-product of the other skills, but should be taught and tested thoroughly throughout any normal course of study. In addition to the other technical aids already in existence, the micro-electronic revolution will soon provide us with new, comparatively cheap and highly sophisticated means of access to the spoken language and we must be able to use them effectively. It is essential that the software should not once more lag far behind the hardware, as has so often been the case in the recent past.

Secondly it seems that we have been too easily awed by Humboldt's remark that "using a language is making infinite use of finite means". Thanks to modern linguistics we are beginning to know/to sort, grade and teach those finite means. But we are still groping our way in the maze of the infinite use. I have tried to show that it might be wise to turn to Descartes for guidance and therefore follow the golden rules he enunciated in 1637 :

- "to analyse any problem into its simplest possible elements ;
- "to proceed from the simple elements to the more complex whole in due order ;
- "to make the enumeration of elements so complete as to be certain of having left nothing out".

Maurice ANTIER
April 1978

A short bibliography

G. RAISBECK
Information theory (M.I.T. 1963)

Th. CLAVENGER Jr and Jack MATTHEWS
The speech communication process (Scott, Foresman 1971)

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING,
XXXI n° 1 october 1976, p. 35 : Gordon Evans & Kirsten Haastrup, Experiments with Cloze Procedure)

XXXI n° 4 july 1977, p. 292 : Hugh Templeton, A new Technique for measuring listening comprehension.